MARONITES.

THE Maronites are the oldest aboriginal inhabitants of Syria, who have been forced by the conquerors of their country to find a refuge in the Lebanon mountains, where for many centuries they maintained their independence, and were faithfully devoted to the religious doctrines and mode of worship of the Christian church. They occupy that part of the Lebanon which is comprised between the rivers Nahr-el-Kelb (Dog River) and the Nahr-el-Bared, from the summit of the mountain on the east to the Mediterranean on the west, bordering on the district of the Anseyreeiah to the north, and on the territory of the Druses on the south. They inhabit the fertile valley which stretches from the seashore at Tripoli to the snow-covered summits above the cedars. This district is thickly sown with villages, built on the borders of ravines and the edge of frightful chasms, surrounded by rocky ramparts which seem almost inaccessible. The grim, naked mountain slopes are rendered productive by artificial terraces, watered by the mountain streams, whose fertilising moisture is distributed by means of rudely-constructed aqueducts. Everywhere vegetation flourishes in rich profusion. The hills are garlanded with vines which, in due season, yield the most luscious grapes. Mulberry gardens are cultivated with great care, which afford abundance of material for the rearing of silkworms; and fruit trees of many varieties dot everywhere the contracted valleys and the gently sloping mountain sides.

The Maronites formerly constituted a distinct division of the Christian church, differing in one essential point from the tenets of the orthodox creed. To oppose the heresy of Eutyches, the leader of the Monophysite sect, who contended that by the union of the divine and human nature the latter was entirely merged in the former, and Christ was no longer man but God, the monk Maron, who in the seventh century lived in a convent on the banks of the Orontes near Hama, startled the Christian world with the monothelitic doctrine, which admits that Christ was both God and man, but divests his humanity of a distinct power of volition and capacity of individual action. The Maronites then formed a political body of considerable importance, united by uniformity of origin, of language as well as religion; and their controlling authority extended over the entire range of the mountains from Antioch to Jerusalem. They were governed by their own emirs or chiefs, who were invested with executive functions by virtue of hereditary succession, their authority being acknowledged by the ruling Moslem power then dominant in Syria. The Greek

Digitized by Google

emperors sent powerful armies against them to bring them back to the true fold of orthodoxy, and reduce them to obedience; and although they burned the convent of Mar Maron, and utterly ravaged and laid waste the southern mountain districts, yet the imperial army was finally routed, the generals were slain, and the Maronites adhered strictly to the monothelitic creed, and enjoyed unrestricted religious freedom during five centuries—the most brilliant period of Saracenic ascendancy in the East.

The Crusades brought the Maronites in contact with the Latin Christians; and having made common cause with the conquerors of Jerusalem, they contributed, by their valour, to crown with victory the arms of the soldiers of the cross. After the expulsion of the Franks from Syria, their independence was imperilled by the Mamelook sovereigns of Egypt, against whom they waged an unequal conflict under Yoobanra Maroun, their popular leader; but they were at last compelled to terminate the bloody and profitless contest, and put an end to devastation and ruin, by professing nominal submission to Mohamedan supremacy. As they wasted their strength in resisting a cruel invader, their moral and spiritual independence became also weakened, and in 1167 A.D. they abjured the monothelitic heresy, and subscribed, in the presence of the Latin Patriarch of Antioch, to the orthodox creed and doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.

When the Druses settled the desolate and abandoned lands of the southern slope of the Lebanon, and grew formidable by their warlike spirit, their undaunted courage, and their strong political organisation, they assumed the controlling authority in the general government of the mountain races; and the emir of the Druses exercised supreme supervision over the Maronites, as well as his own people, and was commissioned to execute the orders addressed to him by the Sublime Porte, whose sovereign powers extend over the mountain regions.

The Maronites and Druses, although they profess religions widely different, yet as the former have adopted as their vernacular tongue the Arabic which displaced the Syriac, there existed a bond of union; and, impelled by common interest, they were generally united in the defence of their independence, of the freedom of religious belief, and the unobstructed management of their domestic affairs. But jealousies and neighbourhood feuds, nevertheless, gave rise to numerous conflicts between the two races; and in recent times the Druses, instigated by Turkish fanaticism, threatened to wipe out the Maronite Christians, by waging against them a war of extermination; and this wicked and ruthless policy was only abandoned upon the earnest remonstrance and the active intervention of the great powers of Europe. When Mehemed Ali invaded the Asiatic dominions of the Turkish empire, and had made himself master of a great part of Syria, the allied powers interfered in 1841 with an armed force to preserve the integrity of the Turkish empire, and prevent the final downfall of a tottering and effete government, and the prostration of a nationality that had accomplished its historical

Digitized by Google

destiny, and was rapidly falling to decay. The forces of the Pasha of Egypt were forced to retire, and through the influence of European diplomacy the Maronites became the dominant race in the Lebanon mountains. The power of the Druses was broken, and a Christian governor was appointed, who, under the Turkish government, exercises supreme authority over Druses as well as Maronites.

The Maronites resemble in their physical characteristics the other races of Syro-Aramæan origin; but their moral and intellectual qualities are peculiar developments, which separate them from every other nationality, and are the natural outgrowth of their inherent powers, and the circumstances which, from time to time, controlled their social and political destiny. Being the inhabitants of a country where nature pours out her bounties with a sparing hand, they were compelled, by necessity, to extort from a niggard soil, by the laborious processes of art, those indispensable means of subsistence which support the human frame, and which, by sustaining its vigour, energy, and intelligence, can alone preserve the integrity of society. Industry is, therefore, one of the most prominent traits of character of this people, only brought into requisition, however, whenever it promises results adequate to the labour expended; but gives way to listless idleness as soon as the season of growth and of the harvest is passed, and agricultural operations are suspended. They have no ambitious aspirations to improve their condition; and, exempt from care and anxiety, they are blessed with a spirit of contentment that keeps them in a happy state of ignorance. They are hospitable in their way; they offer the best they have to their guests with cheerful complacency; but, being poor, they expect from the departing stranger a compensation by way of present for their trouble and expenditure of means. Having long been made the victims of oppression and persecution, their politeness sometimes borders on cringing servility; their spirit of economy degenerates into avariciousness; sagacity is degraded into cunning; and the fear of the tyrant master renders them abject and cowardly slaves. The only intellectual pursuits in which their mind was exercised for ages were their religious controversies and religious devotions; and without advancing with the progress of human knowledge, they have become excessively self-conceited and bigoted. They are the most impudent beggars and menial suppliants, and even many of the better classes are professional mendicants. Every man, woman, and child, from the region of the cedars to the seashore, understands and follows the trade of the begging fraternity, and deems it no degradation to ask alms from the stranger or traveller whom they might perchance meet in the road, or espy in the distance, while engaged in the labours of the field.

The houses of the Maronites are of the simplest construction; they are about fifty feet long, twenty-five feet broad, and eight feet high, and are built of stone, the interior being plastered with clay. The apartments are divided by clay partitions, and the roof is supported by three transverse joists resting on a central stone pillar. This family dwelling has neither windows nor chimney. The fireplace (*mocadé*)

Digitized by Google

is fixed in a recess near the door, which serves the purpose of a kitchen. In the adjoining storeroom are found clay bins of various forms and sizes, which contain supplies, such as *burgool*, beans, onions, and rice, preserved for future use; and baked earthen jars are here stowed away filled with *leben* or curdled milk, with wine, honey (*dibs*), oil, and arrack. The household and cooking implements are a distaff and a spinning-wheel, two-handled earthen pots, frying-pans, wooden spoons, round trays of straw, and a *narghilé*[1] with a cocoa-nut bowl, which is used for smoking by the women as well as the men. The floor of the family room is covered with coarse matting; a sheep's skin takes the place of a chair, and a quilt and a cushion serve as bedding.

The dress of the Maronites exhibits considerable taste and pride of external appearance. The *abba*[2] constitutes the common apparel of the men, and is of different qualities, according to the wealth of the wearer. That of the labouring peasants is of coarse woollen stuff, striped white and black, and fitted up with short sleeves; but among the higher classes it is beautifully worked in red and blue colours, frequently intermixed with gold and silver thread. The ample trousers are of coarse blue-dyed calico, held in place by a plaited shawl wound around the waist. The open-sleeved jacket is of camel's hair dyed brown, and embroidered with blue lace. Under this another jacket is worn, of blue-coloured cotton cloth. Their head-dress is a fez cap or *tarboosh*, entwined by a muslin *kefie* or kerchief, ornamented with flowers and other figures in striking colours. A pair of red shoes of ancient pattern completes the outdoor costume.

The women wear a gown (*embaz*) of blue cotton cloth, open in front and provided with long sleeves. Their trousers, which are drawn tight around their waist and ankles, are of white cotton stuff. The chemisette is of domestic manufacture, woven of refuse silk mixed with cotton thread. The *tandoor* of the Druses[3] was formerly the common head-dress; but since it has been denounced by the church as an abomination which is no longer to be tolerated, the red cap has taken its place, from which a veil of white cotton or mixed silk is suspended.

The mode of living of the Maronites is somewhat patriarchal, although their food is sufficiently substantial and of good quality. They take two meals a day during the winter season, and three meals during the summer. The principal dish, which is universally served up, is *burgool*,[4] stewed with fat or oil and seasoned with onions. Cheese and *leben*, in the form of buttermilk and curds, lentils and preserved grapes, figs and olives, make up the ordinary articles of the daily fare. They rarely indulge in meat, except on Christmas and Easter, when a cow is killed by each village community and the meat is distributed among the households. The more wealthy of the

[1] The name given to the Persian water-pipe.

[2] This is a plain piece of cloth, the mantle of the Arabs, which is thrown across the shoulders.

[3] This is a horn-shaped head-dress, fastened to the fore part of the head.

[4] This is a dish universally used in Syria, and is prepared by boiling wheat with leaven, and drying it in the sun.

Digitized by Google

Maronites fatten two or three sheep every year, which they purchase from the shepherds, and which are fed with great care for four months, when they are fit to be killed. The meat is cut up in strips, is dried in the sun, and is preserved for future use in the mutton suet, which is melted over a slow fire, and to which a little salt is added.

Agriculture is almost the exclusive occupation of the Maronites. The common labouring peasant hires his services to the large landed proprietors in the spring, when the improvements are going forward on the plantations; for which he receives the scanty wages of about twelve or thirteen pence a day, which is increased by the light earnings of his wife, who passes her idle hours in spinning. The rest of the year he labours on his own account by cultivating a small patch of land, which he holds either as proprietor or tenant. The mulberry trees are planted about eight feet apart; and to keep them in good condition, the ground is kept clear from weeds by being turned up with a plough drawn by a pair of oxen. The vines are set out at regular intervals, and are supported on stakes, and they supply grapes for consumption during five months, besides a sweet light-coloured wine, and a viscous kind of grape sugar called *dibs*, which is produced by boiling the juice rapidly for an hour, which, on cooling, is preserved in jars. A small quantity of grain and vegetables is grown in the vacant spaces between the mulberry trees and the vines, or in a patch adjoining them.

The education of the lower classes of the Maronites receives but little attention, and yet opportunities are not wanting for the acquirement of a scholastic education even in these retired mountain retreats. They have six clerical seminaries for the education of the priests, who are instructed in Syriac and Arabic, philosophy and theology; and in two of these institutions Latin and Italian are also taught. The instruction is entirely gratuitous; and the students are subjected to an annual examination held by a board of visitors, who receive their appointment from the Patriarch, to whom they make a report concerning the condition of the schools and the progress of the students.

The sheikhs, the emirs, and the merchants who desire that their sons should be instructed in the higher branches of education, send them to the convent of the Lazarites at Aintoora, or to the Jesuit College at Ghozir, where an extensive course of study is pursued, comprising French, Italian, Turkish, Arabic, arithmetic, and geography, in addition to philosophy, rhetoric, belles-lettres, and Latin.

The Syriac language, which was anciently spoken by the Maronites, and which they exchanged for the Arabic in the thirteenth century, is considered the sacred tongue, in which the Bible is written and the liturgies and prayers of the church are composed. It is prolix in its idiomatic phraseology, flat in its mode of expression, and unharmonious in its method of enunciation. Its primitive energy and vigour has been greatly impaired by the introduction of Greek words to supply the want of technical terms, and the construction of its grammatical framework has been adapted to the Greek model. It is closely allied to the Hebrew, but is deficient in that charming simplicity which presents natural objects in word-paintings, at once highly coloured and

Digitized by Google

most striking. To express the relations which co-ordinate ideas have to each other, the heavy and cumbrous mechanism of particles and periphrases takes the place of the more definite and the more elegant method of inflection. The root-words are lost in the unmethodical verbal changes, and derivatives are not formed by fixed and invariable rules. The Syriac is the oldest, and at the same time the least polished, of all the Aramæan languages.

The Maronites acknowledge the supremacy and infallibility of the papal authority in matters of religion. They form a separate branch of the Roman Catholic Church, for their mode of worship and church service differ to some extent from the practices of the Latin communion. The Patriarch of Antioch, whose ecclesiastical title is Peter, is invested with the highest official dignity, and is chosen by ballot, in secret conclave, by the bishops of the Maronite Church. He has absolute control over the religious affairs transpiring within the limits of his jurisdiction, and he also exercises despotic power in the regulation of the principal concerns of his people, and no appeal lies from his decision to a higher tribunal. He is generally distinguished for superior learning, and for austerity of life and manners. His annual revenue, which is derived from the church lands set apart for this purpose, amounts to a thousand pounds sterling; and he is, in addition, entitled to one-sixth of the revenue of the bishops. The twelve bishoprics of the Maronite Church are supported by a tithe paid in kind, set apart from the produce of the land, besides other emoluments of a purely ecclesiastical character. The ordinary priests receive no regular pay, but depend for their support on voluntary contributions and the proceeds realised from saying masses; but they rely more especially on the labour of their hands, and the laudable efforts of their industry to procure for themselves the necessaries of life by the tillage of the soil. The Maronite clergy of the lower order are generally in indigent circumstances, but the influence which they exercise among their lay brethren is almost unlimited. They are highly respected, for, in a worldly point of view, they stand on a footing of equality with the poorest of the church communicants; they command everywhere ready obedience to their behests; and they are not only the guides and counsellors in the graver matters of public interest, but they control the intimate relations of family life, and not even marriages are contracted without their previous permission. They are not only the friends of the household, but they pry into the secrets of the family circle; they avail themselves of the confessional to gratify their passion for intermeddling in private affairs, and they soothe their vanity by extorting from the ignorant peasantry unquestioned acquiescence to their peremptory authority.

Celibacy is not a necessary condition to enter the priesthood, and many of the lower clergy have large families; but after ordination a priest is no longer permitted to marry; and if he should become a widower by the death of his wife, he is required to remain single for the rest of his life, or divest himself of his sacred functions.

Each village has its chapel and its priest. The service is less ostentatious than that of the Roman Church, but it is no less formal.

Digitized by Google

Mass is celebrated in the Syriac language, of which the worshippers understand nothing, and of which the priests even are frequently ignorant. The gospels are read in Arabic, which is the common vernacular of the people. Both eucharistic elements are administered to the faithful in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The bishops as well as the Patriarch live in convents; and they are always selected from the most learned of the monks, from whom they do not differ in dress or mode of living. They are absolutely forbidden to marry, and are wholly devoted to the duties of their sacred office.

There are over a hundred convents scattered over the mountain regions of Lebanon. They occupy the most picturesque and enchanting spots, surrounded by the most romantic scenery, at once beautiful and sublime. The lands attached to these establishments have been transformed, by skilled labour and well-directed industry, into terraced mulberry gardens and well-planted vineyards in a highly flourishing condition; and it is from the produce of these plantations that the monasteries are supported. The monks not only cultivate the ground, but they ply the tools of many handicrafts: they have brother-shoemakers, brother-tailors, brother-weavers, brother-bakers, and they are engaged in other mechanic arts. They belong to the order of St. Anthony, and wear a coarse woollen frock-coat, gathered round the waist by a girdle, reaching to the knee, and surmounted by a hood which serves as head-dress. Their food is very simple, and their abstemiousness is carried to such an extreme that they never taste of meat. Some of the fraternity follow the professional pursuit of beggars; they pass from village to village, and, entering the dwellings of the peasantry with an air of dignity and moral superiority, they inspire awe and reverence, and never fail to be saluted with a kiss. The widow's mite is cheerfully laid at their feet, even by the humblest Maronite, at the exhibition of a picture of St. Anthony, St. George, or the Virgin Mary, which receives almost divine adoration in the form of various crossings, genuflexions, and passionate kisses.

The Maronites are as superstitious as they are ignorant. They firmly believe that the saints exercise extraordinary power over the life and conduct of men, and they even attribute to them miraculous interference in worldly affairs. Mar Elias is held in the highest estimation, and a Maronite may take God to witness in confirmation of the truth of his statement with falsehood on his lips and treachery in his heart; but if challenged to swear on the altar of St. Elias, he would approach the sacred spot with fear and trembling, determined to affirm nothing but the truth, lest the fate of Ananias should be his lot. In honour of the saints, lamps are burned day and night, and incense is offered up before the pictures, not only in the churches, but in the private houses, and many a poor peasant devotes a portion of his laboriously-acquired earnings to be presented as a propitiatory offering to the patron saint of some particular chapel or convent. Sometimes a report is spread by interested priests that a spring of water has suddenly burst forth in a certain locality which possesses extraordinary healing power, and hundreds, who are made the victims

Digitized by Google

of the delusion, perform a pilgrimage to the holy ground in order to become the beneficiaries of the healing efficacy of the miraculous fountain.

Formerly the feudal system, in its most odious form, was prevalent among the Maronites. The emir of the Druses was recognised as the sovereign ruler of all the races which inhabited the Lebanon, and the sheikhs were the provincial chiefs of the Maronites, who enforced unconditional submission from the peasant, and kept them in a state of servility and debasement, by arbitrary acts of power, by the imposition of onerous duties, and the exaction of extortionate contributions. Even now when the strict feudal rules have been relaxed, and the high pretensions of the sheikhs have been repudiated, the peasantry wend their way to the feudal mansion on Christmas and Easter Day, or on the birth or marriage of a son of the chief, to present to him a free-will offering of fowl, sugar and coffee, and other articles of consumption.

Since the European powers have assumed the protectorate over the Christians of Syria, the social and political condition of the Maronites has been greatly improved. The feudal system exists only in name, and the middle classes are gradually advancing in prosperity, and are rising in social importance. The emirship of the mountain races is now vested in a Christian governor, who is appointed by the Sublime Porte, and is the representative of the Turkish government. He is empowered to redress all grievances inflicted by the provincial chiefs; and all controverted cases are decided by him on appeal, in accordance with the strict rules of law and justice.

AUTHORITIES.

Ten Years' Residence on Mount Lebanon. By Colonel Churchill. 1854.
Travels in Africa, Egypt, and Syria. By William Brown. 1802.
Researches into the Religions of Syria. By Rev. John Wortabet. 1860.
Voyage en Syrie et en Egypte. Par C. F. C. de Volney. 1799.
Eastern Europe and Western Asia. By Arthur Tilly. 1869.
Histoire Générale des Langues Sémitique. Par Ernest Rénan. 1864.

Digitized by Google